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Experts say intelligence stories hurt

By Warren Strobel
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Despite the popular perception that "Russia already knows," press reports about intelligence operations can have drastic and lasting effects on U.S. intelligence-gathering capabilities, experts say.

Former intelligence officials and academic experts, with a few exceptions, criticized media releases detailing sensitive intelligence material allegedly given to the Soviet Union by Ronald W. Pelton, a former mid-level National Security Agency employee.

"If ... an agent has said something, does that mean we ought to have free run on it? I would oppose that," said William Colby, director of the Central Intelligence Agency from 1973 to 1976.

"Once the press gets going on it, they probably tell them [the Soviets] more than the agent would," Mr. Colby said.

The reports could help the Soviets determine the value of information allegedly obtained from Mr. Pelton, said John K. Greaney, former CIA associate general counsel.

"That's the unknown quality when you're handling assets [spies] — the veracity of the information," said Mr. Greaney, executive director of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers. "Confirmation is the key."

"How do they [the media] know what the Soviets know?" asked George Carver, a former CIA deputy director.

Mr. Carver, a senior fellow at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies, said that security breaches can be expensive and long-lasting, forcing intelligence agencies to remold operations that have taken years to develop.

In 1927, he said, British lawmakers trying to score political points read intercepted Soviet cables into Parliament's record. "It was a good two decades before they [British intelligence] ever read [intercepted] another piece of Soviet traffic," he said.

But one expert said that media reports on the Pelton case did not tell the Soviets anything new and charged the Reagan administration with trying to chill the press.

"The administration throughout its history has sort of tried to intimidate people," said Jeffrey T. Richelson, an American University professor and intelligence expert.

Taken to its logical conclusion, Mr. Greaney's argument means "one would never reveal anything about intelligence," Mr. Richelson said. "There doesn't seem to be any balance to that argument."

The current dispute began May when reports surfaced that CIA Director William Casey was considering asking the Justice Department to prosecute five news agencies — The Washington Post, The New York Times, The Washington Times, Time and Newsweek — for publishing material about U.S. communications intelligence.

The move was widely viewed as an attempt to stop The Post from publishing an article it was preparing on the Pelton espionage case. That article was printed Wednesday, but The Post said it had deleted much of the sensitive material.

By that time, however, NBC also had broadcast a report detailing Mr. Pelton's alleged activities.

Mr. Casey, who referred the NBC case to the Justice Department and is considering similar action against The Post, declined a request for an interview.

The law Mr. Casey has cited throughout the debate — Section 798 of Title 18 of the U.S. Code — specifically prohibits publication of classified material relating to U.S. and foreign cryptographic [code-breaking and -making] operations or communications intelligence. Congress passed the law in 1950.

Communications intelligence is the preserve of the NSA, which gathers the data, both coded and uncoded, through a wide array of spy satellites, ground listening stations and other devices.

NSA spokeswoman Carolyn Johnson declined comment on the issue, saying, "That's been our guidance."

The NBC report said that Mr. Pelton allegedly passed to the Soviets details of an operation code-named Ivy Bells, which involved U.S. submarines eavesdropping on Soviet communications from inside its harbors.

In his 1985 book, "The U.S. Intelligence Community," Mr. Richelson describes in detail a similar program, code-named Holystone.

The book suggests that the Soviets were tipped off about the program by the 1969 beaching of a Holystone submarine for two hours on the Soviet coast and other accidents many years ago.

"There are things out there that we wouldn't want the Soviets to know," Mr. Richelson said. "We wouldn't want them to know where Holystone submarines are at a given moment."

But, he said, "I don't see anything so far that's been published that's caused any damage."

"The fact that we are planting listening devices in Soviet harbors is new to me and presumably new to the Soviets," said David Kahn, journalist and author of the "The Codebreakers."

"Presumably they could take countermeasures which would be deleterious" to U.S. intelligence-gathering capabilities, Mr. Kahn said.

"We have to weigh whether this little bit of information will help the American people run their intelligence agencies better or whether it will harm intelligence operations," he said.

Mr. Colby, who directed the CIA under Presidents Nixon and Ford, said that even if the Soviets know about U.S. operations targeted against them, they may choose to ignore them publicly until forced into action by press reports.

He cited an instance, recounted in the memoirs of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, who knew U-2 spy planes were overflying the Soviet Union.

Mr. Colby said the overflights were not what disturbed Mr. Khruschev, whose government eventually shot down one of the U.S. planes. "The thing that sent him up the wall was when President Eisenhower [publicly] took personal responsibility for it," he said.